Asserting Journalistic Autonomy in the 'Post-truth' Era of 'Alternative Facts': Lessons from Reporting on the Orations of a Populist Leader

Angela Romano

Asia Pacific Media Educator, 2017, 21(1), pp. 51–66. DOI 10.1177/1326365X17704287

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Abstract

A current challenge for journalists is how to report on post-truth political discourse in an era when the statements of populist leaders are increasingly characterized by emotionalism, out-of-context use of verifiable facts, euphemisms and double speak. A case study of the much-reported maiden speech by populist leader Pauline Hanson to the Australian Senate in 2016 is used to identify trends and patterns in stories that resulted from her oration. The case study findings were used to distil nine recommendations for journalists about how to research and report on statements by high-profile political and opinion leaders who peddle suspected alternative facts and post-truth logic. The findings indicate a need for journalists to reassert their autonomy over storytelling agendas through decoding post-truth discourse to identify underlying news issues, then applying rigour in certain fundamentals of fact checking, information sourcing, framing and backgrounding of stories. The case study findings have international relevance because the politics and media-management strategies of Hanson and her One Nation party replicate those of populist opinion leaders in the United States, United Kingdom and many other countries.

Keywords

Journalism, story framing, post-truth politics, alternative facts, populist politics, Muslims

Introduction

When the expression ‘alternative facts’ was coined in 2017, it immediately became a popular catchphrase in English-speaking nations to describe statements that are held or expressed ‘either in complete ignorance or with a total disregard for reality’ (Strong, 2017, p. 1). Kellyanne Conway, Counsellor to the United States President, created the term when answering accusations that the White House press secretary had grossly exaggerated the numbers of people in the crowds that attended the presidential inauguration. Rejecting suggestions that the crowd estimates were a falsehood, Conway asserted: ‘Sean Spicer, our press secretary, gave alternative facts’ (Todd, 2017). The increased frequency in which political and opinion leaders in many countries are circulating alternative facts in recent years is associated with the rise of post-truth politics (Strong, 2017) in which participants in political movements rely unabashedly on emotion- or opinion-based appeals rather than policy- or fact-based discussion.

The expression ‘post-truth journalism’ has been dubbed to define a perceived propensity of journalists to ‘reproduce what politicians say without critical comment, thereby allowing falsehoods to proliferate in public discussion’ (Hannan, 2016, p. xviii). Even when journalists attempt to be as critical as possi-ble, it can be inherently difficult to decide whether or how to report on alternative facts and post-truth political discourse because such a conversation is so often tangled with various types of ‘truth’. Post-truth discourse is characterized by ‘wilful blindness to evidence’ and ‘appeal to emotionally based arguments’ which are ‘often rooted in fears or anxieties’ (Laybats & Tredinnick, 2016, p. 204) that represent the real concerns and lived experiences of everyday citizens. Post-truth arguments furthermore commonly include statistics, historical information and other forms of verifiable ‘evidence’ but apply them in ways that distort their contexts or meanings. Post-truth discourses regularly use constant repetition of core motifs, like Donald Trump’s United States election campaign slogans of ‘Make America great again’ or the ‘Vote leave’ catchcry of the United Kingdom’s European Union referendum campaign in 2016. When populist political leaders and their motifs become part of the popular consciousness due to their repeated exposure, they warrant media attention as a real social phenomenon.

The article presents a case study of news media reports about the maiden speech of Senator Pauline Hanson following her election to Australia’s Federal Senate in 2016, which attracted massive media coverage for her attacks on Muslims and other targets. The case study is Australian, but the findings have international relevance as the politics and media-management strategies of Hanson and her One Nation party closely mirror those of populist, nationalistic political players in the United States, the United Kingdom, and many other countries. Case study findings are used to distil recommendations for journalists when dealing with political and opinion leaders who peddle suspected alternative facts and post-truth logic.

Hanson's speech and the case study method

Hanson's provocative speech to the Senate attracted intense local and international media attention. In common with many prominent populists in Western nations, Hanson voiced wide-ranging denunciations of the character and conduct of Muslims. Declaring that Australia was 'in danger of being swamped by Muslims' (Hanson, 2016, p. 938), she associated Muslims with hyper-masculine and misogynist culture, crime, violence, drug dealing, antisocial behaviour, radicalization and terrorism, which she proposed to address by stopping Muslim immigration, banning the burqa and other measures (Hanson, 2016, pp. 938–940). Hanson acknowledged that she was deliberately echoing the locally famous maiden speech that she had delivered in 1996 as a newly elected member of Australia's House of Representatives, when she had claimed that the nation was 'in danger of being swamped by Asians' (2016, p. 938). Although Hanson's Senate speech mainly targeted Muslims as a source of discontent, she also lambasted Chinese ownership of Australian land and assets, the welfare system, the family law system and excessive demands of single mothers, among others.

The Factiva database was used to identify journalistic stories that mentioned Hanson's speech or topics discussed in the speech. Factiva archives stories from Australian newspapers, the Australian Associated Press wire service and major online news media including the Australian Broadcasting Service's online content. Replicated stories were eliminated so that for newspapers that had both an Internet and print version, only one version was included in the study. It is acknowledged that not all Australian media organizations are represented in the Factiva data base, and for various reasons, small numbers of stories from those media organizations that are represented are not archived. Even so, the sample is sufficiently comprehensive to identify overall trends in Australian mainstream news media's reporting of Hanson's speech.

The study included all news reports, feature stories, editorials, opinion pieces, commentaries, background briefings, current affairs reports and interview-based stories by staff reporters or contributors that made mention of Hanson's speech after its delivery, whether as the main focus or in brief. Letters or tweets to the editor and reader's comments on the stories were not included. A three-day period was studied in order to capture the immediate reportage of the speech, plus follow-up articles about issues emerging from the speech. Hanson presented her speech to the Senate on 14 September 2016. Given that online journalists could report the speech immediately or on the same day, the dates that were studied for online media were 14 September (labelled Day 1 in the analysis), 15 September (Day 2) and 16 September (Day 3). Recognizing that newspaper reports would only appear the day after the speech, the study dates were 15 September (Day 1), 16 September (Day 2) and 17 September (Day 3). This search produced 112 stories for analysis.

The stories were analysed for their story content, fact-checking, sourcing, story framing/angles, and backgrounding/contextualization of issues. Numbers and

percentages are used extensively in this article in order to highlight the prevalence of certain trends that appeared in the stories, but the overall goal of this research is qualitative. The aim was to identify patterns in the nature of the reporting in order to understand how journalists researched and wrote stories about an event by a populist public figure who expressed multiple contested or contestable claims on issues of social and political importance.

Story Framing and Discussion Agendas in a Post-truth Era

Journalists often refer to a news media story's frame as its 'angle' or 'slant'. Framing involves choosing some element of perceived reality and using it to structure how an issue or problem will be defined, interpreted and treated in a story or other type of communication (Entman, 1993, p. 52). For example, research studies about journalistic stories on immigration identify four major 'master frames' on the topic:

1. The human-interest frame in which refugees and other immigrants are viewed as people in need of help and compassion from the receiving host country;
2. The threat frame in which immigrants are assessed as some type of risk to the host society;
3. The economic frame in which immigration is discussed in terms of its economic costs or benefits for the host country; and
4. The managerialist frame about strategies for dealing with the consequences of immigration, with little focus on whether immigrants are wanted or not (Dekker & Scholten, 2017, p. 4).

The choice of a story frame or angle does not in itself determine whether the story will present favourable or critical viewpoints on the topic. As an example, subject to the nature and amount of information that is available to the media, journalists who write immigration stories with a human-interest frame have the editorial choice to portray immigrants as victims who genuinely need help, to present the opposite perspective or some combination of both. Story framing is thus significant not because it determines whether a story is positive or negative but because it sets the agenda for the types of information that will be presented to the audience and the context for how the topic will be discussed.

How does a journalist select an angle for a story when some public figure has delivered a statement that has sufficient news value to warrant reporting, such as occurred in Hanson's speech, but which is also potentially riddled with distortions, manipulations and half-truths? In such circumstances, an important first task is to identify and decipher any euphemisms and double speak in the statement. Post-truth political discourse is rich in ambiguity, often including arresting verbal

expressions with uncertain meaning but with emotional resonance that appeals to common human fears and aspirations. Good journalism plays a role in helping communities to achieve clarity. Journalists do this by probing expressions or statements with uncertain meaning to find out from the speaker 'what is the problem?' or 'what do you want to be solved or achieved?' Trump's incessantly repeated election slogan, 'Make America great again' required decrypting as to what he thought was not great about America, what previous era/s in American history represented the greatness that he wanted to see 'again', and what would be the criteria for judging when America had succeeded in returning to greatness. Journalists unintentionally surrender control of story agendas if they do not decode the framing of the euphemisms used by post-truth opinion leaders in order to determine whether and how the source's news angle warrants media attention.

Framing of Hanson's Speech—Who was in Control?

In the three-day period that was studied, 112 stories were published in which details of Hanson's speech formed the whole or part of the story's substance. This high prominence given to Hanson's speech framed both the event of her presenting the speech itself and the topics that she discussed as a matter of public importance. The number of the stories was exceptionally high compared to the attention normally given to maiden speeches. A Factiva search identified only six stories that mentioned Anne Aly's first speech in the House of Representatives and only nine stories that mentioned Malarndirri McCarthy's first speech in the Senate in the first three days after their respective speeches. Both Aly and McCarthy delivered their speeches in the same week as Hanson, and the parliamentary debut of both had high historic value. Aly is Australia's first female Muslim parliamentarian and one of only two practicing Muslim politicians out of the 226 members in Australia's House of Representatives and Senate. McCarthy is Australia's first female Indigenous Senator, and one of three Indigenous politicians in the national parliament. In addition, McCarthy's speech was delivered immediately after Hanson's. Journalists reporting on Hanson would have been fully aware that McCarthy was giving her speech, and they had equal capacity to report on it if their media organizations had wished them to do so.

Hanson received massive publicity because journalists had been primed to give the speech maximum coverage. Journalists had received prior indications that Hanson's speech, which was being kept 'top-secret', would 'go beyond her normal addresses' thus making it 'one of the most hotly awaited speeches in federal parliament' (Australian Associated Press, 2016). Journalists also spot-lighted Hanson's speech because stories with conflict have long been seen as newsworthy. As a consequence, the inherent sensationalism of Hanson's 'us versus them' framing of Muslims, accompanied by dramatic allegations in fervent language, attracted such substantial media coverage even though the following

discussion indicates that Hanson, her speech and her frameworks for understanding Muslims as a threat, may not have warranted so much attention.

Of the 112 stories about Hanson's speech that were studied for this research, 102 (91.1 per cent) addressed her blunt commentary on Muslims and Islam as their main focus or a sub-theme. When Hanson claimed that Australians were at risk of being 'swamped', a starting point for framing would be to first ask what does being 'swamped' actually mean. If Hanson was indicating that Australians would feel overwhelmed once the Muslim population had increased past a certain percentage, what percentage/s marked the tipping point? Only one-seventh of the sampled stories that discussed Hanson's criticisms of Muslims (14 stories, 13.7 per cent) pointed to Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures that show that Muslims make up 2.2 per cent of the population. Although several stories added comments or quotes to indicate that 2.2 per cent was not a figure that suggested Australians were being inundated, only one story in the entire sample—contributed by Alex Reilly, a university academic, and not a staff journalist—pointed out explicitly: 'There is obviously no precise number of people or proportion of the population that can be determined to have achieved a "swamping" of the country' (Reilly, 2016).

This example illustrates how the translation of euphemisms into plain English will usually require consideration of emotional drives rather than straightforward mathematical or factual realities. Did the feeling of being 'swamped' relate to a level of public anxiety rather than simple population figures? Hanson had connected Muslims with terror, and it is possible for just one or two terrorists to disrupt the activities of whole neighbourhoods, cities or even nations. Hanson's speech also alleged that the presence of Muslims heightened physical insecurity (crime, violence and drug dealing), imposed economic costs (paying for halal labelling and welfare for children from polygamous relationships), forced uncomfortable cultural adjustments (halal food labelling and following of Sharia law) and sparked social disconnection (breakdown of social cohesion in neighbourhoods with high Muslim populations and increased levels of fear) (Hanson, 2016, pp. 398–340). A handful of stories recognized why such allegations were given credence by a proportion of Australian citizens. As an example, conservation columnist Chris Kenny pointed to recent news reports about actual or attempted terror attacks locally and abroad and their impact on public attitudes. 'These are real stories creating real victims and anxieties,' he observed (Kenny, 2016, p. 18). Reilly's story was the only one that directly questioned how this context of fear could shape the definition of what being 'swamped' meant in practice. 'For some, a very small number of Muslims might be sufficient to engender a fear of being "swamped",' Reilly noted. 'For others, "swamping" is simply an inflammatory term for issues of integration' (Reilly, 2016).

One-quarter of stories that discussed Hanson's castigation of Muslims (26 stories, 25.5 per cent) very closely followed the framing used by Hanson in her speech and offered only minor or no critical or alternative views. These stories involved extensive direct quoting of her depictions of Muslims as a threat, thus widely disseminating her 'us versus them' framing. Another third of the stories

31 stories, 30.4 per cent) focused on criticism of Hanson's perspectives. In rebutting or attacking the claims, they again gave varying degrees of prominence to her 'us and them' framing and widely circulated her accusations that Muslims were threats, albeit with counter arguments being offered. Smaller numbers of stories were framed around how the media and major political groupings should manage or respond to Hanson as a populist but divisive leader (13 stories, 12.7 per cent). Some stories were framed around how parliamentarians should respond to discussion that they find morally offensive (five stories, 4.9 per cent). The remaining stories addressed a disparate mix of frames relating to business, politics and society (27 stories, 26.5 per cent). The stories about Hanson's comments on Muslims thus used a range of frames, but more than half either replicated Hanson's 'us versus them' framework outright or duplicated her 'us versus them' framework with the addition of dissenting voices and opinions.

The nature of reporting on Hanson's speech reflects the propensity of journalists to cover news as a series of events rather than as issues. In order to differentiate reporting about an event to reporting about issues that arise from an event's context and connections with other events, Marty Linsky points to the example of how fires are reported.

> A big fire is news; the continuing debate about the causes of fires is not. . . the significance of a fire depends on whether it is one of a series or an isolated instance; whether it results from arson or some other cause; whether the loss is insured or not; and whether it fits within or outside of some current or needed dialogue about public purposes. Though fires do not occur out of context, they are reported that way. (Linsky, 1988, p. 214)

Journalists with an event orientation could create a credible portrayal of the 'facts' of what was articulated in Hanson's speech simply by providing an accurate and balanced summary of her words. In reproducing Hanson's 'us and them' framework of Muslims as a threat, journalists would necessarily discuss the nature of perceived threats, whether there was a real danger or not, and/or how risks could be contained. They would have the option of adding counter-perspectives through additional facts or comments from other sources that provide what journalists refer to as 'the other side of the story'. Journalists with an issue orientation would use the speech as a starting point for identifying issues of concern to the community, rather than making Hanson's words their primary focus. This would have opened opportunities for more sophisticated framing around the complex, underlying issues of why non-Muslim Australians might feel apprehensive about Muslims. One of many alternative frames might have addressed the means and challenges of building cohesive communities in the face of demographic change. In adopting this frame, the journalist would inherently be seeking different voices and insights to those required for event-oriented stories.

It should be noted that some stories that were identified for this case study were framed around Hanson as a political phenomenon. These stories demonstrated an issues orientation, but the issues were not based on scrutiny of the words in the speech itself to identify trends, problems or phenomena worth covering.

While replication of Hanson's 'us and them' framing about Muslims dominated media coverage in the first day following the speech, such framing was less frequent on the second and third days. Hanson's 30-minute speech was delivered at 5PM, leaving relatively little time on the first day for journalists to reflect or canvass alternative information sources who might help them to identify different frames before reports were submitted. It is telling, however, to consider stories that focused on broader issues of multiculturalism and immigration in addition to Hanson's comments about Muslims. Such issues attracted the attention of business and economic reporters, who showed high autonomy in developing framing about the costs and benefits of multiculturalism and migration, mainly in business or economic terms but sometimes at the levels of citizen health and well-being. Examples included stories about how national approaches to cultural diversity affected certain types of markets that depended on foreign workers or income, and the economic impacts of certain types of visas for foreign workers or investors. Such stories appeared from the first day, indicating that even in the face of tight deadlines, journalists were capable of refining or challenging the framing that was initially presented to them.

Verification: Fact Checking and 'the Other Side of the Story'

Checking the accuracy of information is the hallmark of journalistic practice. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001, p. 71) note that 'the discipline of verification is what separates journalism from entertainment, propaganda, fiction or art'. Sometimes checking information does not lead to an outright confirmation or disconfirmation of a new or contested claim, and if that is the case, journalists will commonly collect as many facts as possible that as a body can support or undermine that claim. Tuchman explains that 'one amasses a host of supposed facts that when taken together, present themselves as both individually and collectively self-validating. Together they constitute a web of facticity by establishing themselves as cross-referents to one another' (Tuchman, 1978, p. 86). When journalists cannot find sufficient evidence to validate or invalidate a claim that has been made, another standard procedure is to quote many people in a story to indicate that the journalist has attempted to canvass sufficient perspectives to provide an objective, balanced and credible report (Tuchman, 1978).

Richard Ericson, Patricia Baranek and Janet Chan noted in the 1980s that Western journalists of the time tended to gather information from a limited range of sources, such as news releases and quotes obtained from interviews, rather than accessing documentary sources (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1989, p. 1). Useful documentary sources for journalists include official records, databases, archives, statistics, research and analytical reports, historical data, or other formal or informal records about individuals and communities. The proliferation of the

Internet and other new media since Ericson and his colleagues conducted their research should have led to dramatic increases in the use of documentary sources, particularly for journalists attempting to check the types of highly contestable claims that are made in post-truth political discourse. The results of this research suggest that this is not necessarily the case.

One-fifth of the 112 stories about Hanson's speech relied solely on either a summary of Hanson's comments or the author's personal analysis of them, and used no other information source to confirm, contest or contextualize her claims (22 stories, 19.6 per cent). A little more than half the stories used commentary from interviews or public statements from people other than Hanson but showed no evidence of attempts to check documentary information to corroborate or analyse the claims (61 stories, 54.5 per cent). Only one-quarter of news media stories about Hanson's speech referred to documentary sources or similar types of data (29 stories, 25.9 per cent), with the majority of stories in this group also including commentary from interviews or public statements from people other than Hanson (22 stories, 19.6 per cent).

The commentary from interviews and public statements in the stories rarely provided information that would help audiences to scrutinize the complicated labyrinth of claims that Hanson had made. Comments from these sources were predominantly based on opinions and value judgements, and only occasionally offered analysis or evidence that could be used to check facts or understand Hanson's speech. For example, one online news story cited an impressive variety of sources, but the majority of statements were opinions along the lines that Hanson 'peddles prejudice and fear', she had presented a 'racist, bigoted, divisive speech', and she 'doesn't know what she's talking about' (Karp, 2016). Such comments presented 'the other side of the story', added dynamism to the story through animated commentary, potentially appealed to the audience's emotions and value systems, and illuminated the concerns of people who rejected Hanson's policies. On the other hand, an audience member could easily dismiss such evidence-free comments as predictable posturing from political or interest groups that opposed Hanson. One source in the online news story did offer tangible evidence, in the form of an observation that Hanson was 'wrong' and 'illegal' in calling for a restriction of certain Islamic practices, because 'the constitution guaranteed freedom of religion' (Karp, 2016). However, the online news story did not link to the Constitution, nor did it include any wording to indicate that the reporter had checked the accuracy of this claim. This story was indicative of the pattern of reliance on interviews and statements that provided mainly opinion, and minimal or no fact checking of the limited facts or examples that were provided in those utterances.

Out of the 29 stories that referred to documentary sources, the most commonly used data were ABS figures (12 stories, 41.4 per cent) that showed Muslims made up 2.2 per cent of the population. ABS figures were used to challenge Hanson's claims that Australia was being 'swamped', or to show that the Muslim population was increasing at a slower rate than other groups such as atheists, agnostics

and Hindus. Other documentary sources that were used were visa and other immigration data, government records and reports, reports from academic or research institutions, vote tallies from the federal election, investment data, historical data, and factual information about both Islam and democratic processes. Even though many of these sources could be found through a few minutes of Internet searching, in total, there were only 41 documentary sources referred to in the 112 stories, compared to 181 interviews and public statements.[i]

Context, Complexity, Voices, Authenticity and Proportionality

A useful tool for analyzing Hanson's speech is the formula developed by Perry and Len-Ríos (2015), which measures excellence in media stories by their con- text, complexity, voices, authenticity and proportionality. Context provides the background of dates, locations, history, social contexts and culture so that audiences understand the issues and their connection with the larger world. Complexity extends this background with multiple perspectives, recognizing that there may be many different versions of the same story, and all may be equally valid. Journalists must be purposeful in selecting which people they incorporate in the story, to ensure that the different voices represent all the significant perspectives about the topic. The voices that are included must be authentic; they must go beyond superficial answers and share experiences that reveal the truth of their personal values and knowledge. The stories that result should be like a map in which all demographics and issues are represented with proportionality; journalists, like cartographers, cannot create an accurate, comprehensive map if their rendering excludes some areas or has exaggerated the size of some areas against others (Perry & Len-Ríos, 2015, pp. 6–10).

In the 112 stories about Hanson's speech, 49 stories harkened back to her 1996 oration, when her refrain that Australia was being 'swamped by Asians' stimulated a volatile public debate. These stories would have benefited from far more contextual information about the 1996 speech that would have helped audiences to determine whether Hanson had a track record of making credible warnings about the risks associated with minority groups. In two-fifths of stories that mentioned the earlier speech, there was no context, backgrounding or interpretation of the significance of the 1996 oration for understanding Hanson's words or actions in 2016 (20 stories, 40.8 per cent). Almost half of the stories referred to 1996 in order to provide insights about Hanson as a political phenomenon, such as her journey back to parliament after her election defeat in 1998, the roots of her popular appeal and the lessons learnt from 20 years ago about how rival political forces should respond to Hanson today (24 stories, 49 per cent). A few stories compiled lists of the problems that Hanson complained about in her 1996 speech, and compared them to issues that Hanson objected to in her 2016 speech

(three stories, 6.1 per cent). Only two stories in the sample (4.1 per cent) explored in any way whether Hanson's 1996 forecasts of a potential Asian invasion had been credible. One story suggested that Hanson lacked adequate foundations for both her 1996 and 2016 claims: 'so far she has not explained what happened to the supposed invasion of the 1990s. She has linked organised crime, welfare fraud, unemployment and the prison population to Muslims without producing data or evidence to back her claims' (Jabour, 1996). The second story quoted Hanson as saying that Asians had made up 4 per cent of Australia's population in 1996 compared to 10 per cent in 2016, thus if the Asian population had increased over time, the Muslim population could do the same (Curtis, 2016). Such statements could assist the public—albeit in a limited way—to consider the value of Hanson's 2016 warnings about Muslims by using the benefit of hindsight to evaluate her earlier predictions.

The quote from Hanson that used Asian migration trends to rationalize her 2016 forecasts indicates the interrelation of context and complexity in media stories. In quoting Hanson, the story added context, but it also homogenized minority communities in ways that denied their complexity. No contextual information was provided in the story to indicate why the public should believe that patterns of migration from Asia's 48 countries to Australia from 1996 to 2016 would be a reliable indicator of migration from the 50 Muslim-majority countries around the world to Australia from 2016 onwards.

Complexity exists not just between minority communities but within them. Only three of the 112 stories in the case study pointed to the complexity within Australia's Muslim communities. One opinion piece expressed concern that even though Australian Muslims are descendants or immigrants from 31 nationalities, with further variations between adherents of the majority Sunni and minority Shia, Betashi, Ahmadi, Alwai and Druze denominations, journalists still attempt to find one spokesperson who can represent all Muslims, 'squishing this broad community into one homogenous blob' (Rachwani, 2016). The author, a Muslim writer and community leader, also complained that reductionism in media and public narratives 'reduce Muslims to caricatures' (Rachwani, 2016). The two other stories that defied such typecasting did so by pointing to the diversity in Muslim settlement experiences in Australia. Reports from the provincial city of Shepparton and coastal region of Illawarra described harmonious integration of Muslim and non-Muslim community members over decades. Interviewees from Shepparton and Illawarra, each independently contrasted the experiences of their communities with those of the regional city of Bendigo, the site of strident anti-mosque campaigns and Reclaim Australia protests (McIlwain, 2016 p. 12; White, 2016). Such stories represent what Munnik (2017, p. 280) describes as a shift from 'voice to voices', which allows audiences to engage with a plurality of sources and experiences.

Typecasting and lack of complexity in the majority of the 112 stories was unsurprising given the information sources that were used. Out of the 181 people other than Hanson who were quoted directly or indirectly in the stories, less than

one-tenth were Muslim community leaders or grassroots Muslim community members (18 citations, 9.9 per cent). By far, the majority of sources were politi- cians, former politicians or in one case, an unsuccessful political candidate, making up almost three-quarters of all sources (129 citations, 71.3 per cent). Other sources were non-Muslim community leaders or grassroots community members (13 citations, 7.2 per cent), business people (8 citations, 4.4 per cent), artists or media people (6 citations, 3.3 per cent), researchers/educators (3 citations, 1.7 per cent), inter- national diplomatic/government representatives (3 citations, 1.7 per cent) and an international student (1 citations, 0.6 per cent).

This selection of sources both reflected and contributed to the event orienta- tion and 'us versus them' framing in more than half of the 112 stories. In choosing to frame stories around Hanson's allegations of Muslims being threats and her proposed strategies for containing those threats, the predominance of politicians' voices might be seen as appropriate because in a representative democracy voters delegate responsibility to elected officials to address such issues. If journalists had adopted the recommendation of the Reporting Islam project (2016)—and had delayed selecting story angles until after they had canvassed a wide variety of views and accounts, conversation with a cross-sector of Muslim voices—they would have been less dependent on Hanson's 'us and them' theme. Greater variation both in the voices in the story and overall story framing may have resulted.

Journalists' reliance on current, former or aspiring politicians as a source of information was also indicative of standard journalistic routines of turning to authority figures in easy-to-access institutions who are deemed to have the expertise, resources and mandate that enables them to provide credible, reliable information (Tuchman 1978, pp. 91–92). Almost all of the political sources mentioned in the stories held high ranks in the political cadre—the prime minister, the former prime minister who had been in power when Hanson was elected in 1996 and cabinet ministers. Lower ranking political sources were readily available but rarely used. Several other politicians delivered their first speech to parliament in the same week as Hanson, including Anne Aly and Peter Khalil of Egyptian descent, Julie Banks of Greek descent and Malarndirri McCarthy of Indigenous heritage. The contents of the speeches indicate that all four had relevant personal experience, values or expertise to represent the concerns of different community sectors about issues of integration, migrant settlement, multiculturalism, welfare or community cohesion. Aly, a counter-terrorism expert, was also well placed to help journalists with information or connections in relation to Hanson's claims about Muslim radicalization and terrorism. Despite the proximity of such sources, the only time they were discussed in the 112 stories in connection to Hanson's speech were five references to McCarthy and one to Khalil. All but one of these six references was a brief, passing mention. Even when dealing with politicians, journalists selected people to speak based on formal job descriptions and status markers of authority, rather than what Perry and Len-Ríos (2015, p. 8) call the authenticity of their voices in representing community perspectives.

The disproportionally large number of sources from the highest levels of political life were matched with problems of proportionality in the coverage of Hanson's speech altogether. In the hours that followed Hanson's speech, the online Crikey news magazine published figures indicating that media had been paying disproportionate attention to One Nation senators in previous months (Whyte, 2016). This report offered a timely warning of a continuing trend. Many of the stories that were circulated after Hanson's speech included comments that she should be treated seriously because she spoke on behalf of more than half a million voters. While it is true that 593,013 people voted for Hanson's One Nation party, this represented less than one-twentieth of eligible voters (4.3 per cent of all voters; Australian Electoral Commission, 2016). While One Nation's senators held considerable power because the government did not have a majority of seats in the Senate and was seeking their support, there was a total of 20 cross-bench senators that the government was seeking partnerships with, not just the four from Hanson's party. The research findings indicate that more thought is needed about how journalists can represent the concerns of the minority that supports Hanson without providing disproportional coverage to Hanson herself.

It is important to note that stories on Hanson's speech were rarely positive in tone. Only nine of the 112 stories on Hanson's speech (8 per cent) contained comments that agreed with any of Hanson's ideas, and most positive comments were restricted to limited elements of her speech. Even so, the prominence that the media gave to her framing and ideas may have been more influential than positive commentary. Veteran political journalist Paul Kelly summarizes the impact of unrelenting negative publicity during Hanson's first term in parliament in 1996.

> Hanson received an exaggerated coverage because the media, profoundly hostile to her views, felt that exposure was the prelude to extinguishment. The unintended consequence was different. Hanson's support and importance rose to reflect the coverage she had received. A cruel irony and a miscalculation by the quality media (Kelly, 1998, pp. 95–96).

Conclusions

Many lessons can be drawn from the overall patterns of reporting of Hanson's first speech to the Senate in 2016. Tip-offs that the speech would be forceful, coupled with the dramatic rhetoric and confrontational content of the speech, ensured that Hanson received massive coverage that framed her and her speech as worthy of enormous public attention. When dealing with high-profile, sensationalist public orations like this, the answer for journalists is neither to ignore them nor to replicate the utterances in an unreflective way, nor to attempt to counterbalance perceived distortions with moralization or expressions of disdain. The trends that emerged in the study indicate a need to return to fundamental principles so that journalists can reclaim their authority to shape

news agendas and investigate the underlying community concerns and problems that feed these outburst of post-truth discourse. These fundamental principles are:

1. Assess how much coverage is proportional to the significance of the issue, and how much attention this particular speaker warrants in relation to the issues.
2. Minimize coverage of speeches and public statements that rely on emotive language and manipulation of facts. Study these statements as a means to identify the real problems, living conditions and experiences of community members who support populist leaders and look to them for answers.
3. Translate euphemisms, double speak and generalizations into plain English to pinpoint what genuine fears, problems or issues may underlie the rhetoric.
4. Fact check rigorously. Attempting to obtain 'both sides of the story' by simply seeking out opinions from speakers with a different perspective to the first speaker will not compensate for a lack of fact checking.
5. Use documentary sources as much as possible when checking facts.
6. Use interviews and public statements to provide details about community dynamics, human values and lived experiences that are not easily accessible from documentary sources. When checking facts, interviews should almost always be a supplement to searches of documentary sources rather than the only method used to verify details.
7. Talk to all different groups with a stake in the issue, and ensure that stories include suitable numbers and quality of voices from those groups.
8. Choose story angles that offer the best ways of understanding the issues rather than adopting the frames of the most strident or outspoken person who talks about the issues.
9. Do not skimp on background and contextual details that help audiences to interpret the significance of events and issues.

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Author's bio-sketch

Angela Romano is Associate Professor of Journalism and the Honours Coordinator for the Creative Industries Faculty at the Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia. She researches a wide range of issues relating to politics, democracy, journalism and journalism education. She has previously worked as a reporter, radio announcer and freelance foreign correspondent during a 10-year period and was an international fellow for a semester at the Kettering Foundation in Dayton, Ohio, USA, exploring applications of deliberative democracy and journalism.

E-mail: a.romano@qut.edu.au

Note

[i] If a person or documentary source was quoted directly or referred to indirectly more than once in the same story, the person or source was counted only once. If the same person or source was quoted directly or indirectly in multiple stories, the person or source was counted for each story that s/he or it appeared in.